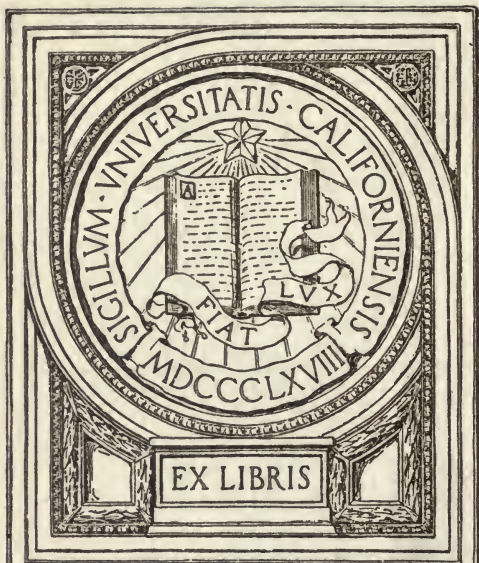




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LIKE A TREE



A sermon preached at the First Congregational Church, Oakland, September 10, 1916, by the pastor, Francis J. Van Horn. Stenographically reported.



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F. J. Van Horn

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LIKE A TREE

"Blessed is the man who . . . is like a tree."
—Psalm 1, 3.



O wrote a man who lived in Judea, whose experience of nature we should say was a limited experience and who knew of trees only in the stunted forms that are found in Palestine. But every poet, every prophetic soul has had much the same vision, used the same figure of speech, and, in various ways all have said this same thing,—“A man is like a tree.”

There was a man, born a hundred years ago, who in his maturity went out into the woods and the fields and wrote a volume which became a classic, “A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers.” He found a little epitome of the world. He studied nature while out in the woods, surrounding a little New England town, wrote “Walden” and became famous. One wonders what Henry David Thoreau would have written if he could have spent a week in the Yosemite; what a volume he would have put forth if he could have spent some weeks in the Big Basin or among the Great Trees of our California forests. Or, again, what would David have done if, in-

stead of having his experience with the little hills of Palestine and their little trees, David had lived here in California and had seen the sweep of our plains and the lift of our mountains and had lived for a little under the majestic presence of our trees. Would he still have written "A man is like a tree?" Would he have dared to write—as we Californians would certainly write our Psalm—"Blessed is the man who is like a big tree!"

It is John Muir—at once scientist and poet—who said that to live a little while under our great trees was in itself an education; that "to become acquainted"—in his phrase—"with a great tree is an event in a man's life;" and I suppose, for the very same reason, that he felt—instinctively poetic soul that he was—that the tree, like the man, may be said to have a character of its own, that speaks to our own character—the soul of the tree speaking to the soul of the man.

On the train, coming up from Southern California some weeks ago, I happened to overhear a lad who was grumbling that his dearest desire had been denied him. He had been planning for years that when he came to California he would see a big tree; and now here he was in California, nearing the end of his journey, and through some mistake of his mother they were on the wrong train, and there was not time to make a change and go the other route, so he

would have to go back home again, denied the privilege of seeing a big tree; and home again for him meant back to Western Nebraska. Do you know what that means—Western Nebraska? It means not a tree; it means fence-posts; it means something that has been transplanted; no dignity, no majesty of tree life; no wide-spread limbs to shade the earth and comfort the soul. The boy felt in his innermost soul that he was being robbed of something. And here was his mother, hurrying on to San Francisco, anxious to get again to a big city and to a big hotel, into a big theatre or a big department store. The boy wanted to go up among the big trees. He was right; he was being robbed! The boy ought to have had an unforgettable, life-stamping experience from meeting the big trees and getting acquainted with them. He was being denied that, was being hustled back to Nebraska, with only the unproven fairy story that in California there was a big tree, that you could drive a team of horses through!

So I say, we may thank God that the experience of knowing the big trees has come to us. Mark you, I did not say seeing them; I said *knowing* them, for I want you to keep in mind this, that the tree has a character, that the soul of the tree can speak to the soul of the man,—if there is anything of the poet in him. God help us if the poetry has all been squeezed out of our

souls, in the hardness of our modern life!

It was my privilege to spend a week or so this summer among the big trees of our great California groves—an experience of a life-time for me,—and out of that experience I come to you to bring some lessons which I feel sure the trees spoke to me, as I lived with them, as I got a bit acquainted with them, as I came to know them and felt that, perchance, they knew me and spoke to me.

So, in simple fashion, I learned these things: First, it seems to me that the tree is like a man, and a man is like a tree, in that the real man and the great tree, each of them have a certain wonderful dignity of character. I mean, now, *real* dignity, not a simulated dignity; not a false dignity, a *real* dignity. There is a dignity, so-called, among men sometimes that is only a sort of superciliousness; there is a dignity that suggests only an aloofness and remoteness, a coldness; there is a dignity that is in the manner only, that leaning over backward, ceases to become dignity at all. Now a tree, always possesses a dignity of its own, and never yields that dignity because of unfortunate position. How often a man is toppled over from his position of dignity because circumstances are against him; just because life is not what he would have it, or as he planned it, or is not pleasant to him. His dignity departs, and he becomes

only a fretful child, instead of a dignified soul. But the tree, have you not noticed how the tree adapts itself to circumstances? The earth may slide away from under its root, or a great boulder may come crashing down the mountain side and the tree perforce must lean from its perpendicular, but the tree always leans gracefully; it adjusts itself to circumstances, and you cannot, even by the wildest effort of the imagination, think of the tree as grumbling and complaining because the circumstances of its life are not just as the tree would have it.

Now, what are the elements of this dignity? First, is there not this, that the tree is firmly in the earth? How splendidly it roots itself down into the soil and underneath the rocks. Without apology, it spreads its great buttressing roots, far and wide; it is not ashamed to say openly before the world that it is growing out of the common clay, of which the world is made. There are men who are ashamed of their environment; there are men who feel that to confess themselves earthly is to show that they are not spiritual; who draw hard and fast lines between that which is natural and of the earth and that which is spiritual and of the heavens; but the tree grows out of the earth in order that it may lift itself toward the heavens. So does the true man; never ashamed of his humble origin, whatever it may be; never ashamed of the fact that he has a body,

with its weaknesses, that must be cared for, patiently and always; never ashamed of the fact that he must give a good deal of time, carefully, patiently, to taking care of his body, in order that he may have within a sound body, a sound mind and a reasonably wholesome soul.

But the tree gains added dignity, because, while it is firmly of the earth, grows out of it, deeply rooting itself down and wide out into the earth and gripping it surely, the most of its life is far above the earth. And the true man also is like the tree; he does grow out of the earth, he does recognize his physical limitations; he does take care of his body, as a sacred possession, but he does not live for his body; he does not exist for the sake of taking care of his body; he does not find the joy of living in ministering to his body. His life, the real, large, forthputting life of the man is above the earth; the finest things in his life are the things that are farthest lifted above the earthly plane; and the man is careful, even as the tree is careful, that it shall be ever above the earth.

Sometimes, as a curious phenomenon among trees, you may note how the roots of the tree seem by an effort, a conscious effort, to be lifting themselves, to be reaching out and up to keep themselves and the tree above the encroachment of the soil.

I passed an orchard this summer, that had

every appearance of having once been a profitable bearing orchard, but as I saw it after the freshets of last winter, and perhaps the winter before, the sand from the hillside had been washed down, and all over the level field of the orchard had piled itself up a foot high, two feet high, and more, around the trunks of the trees, and every tree in the orchard was dead or dying. Too much earth killed the tree. Too much earth kills a man!

Let a man live of the earth and yet above the earth; let a man root himself to the circumstances of his physical life, and the worldly things about him, but Oh, let him be careful how these shall sweep in upon him, in his desire of greed or worldliness, until the life is killed out of his soul, and instead of the great, uplifted and enduring foliage of a beautiful life, he becomes only a wreck of what was once a promising life—a soul blasted, withered, dying—dead. Too much earth! Too much earth!

Another element in the dignity of the tree—I know not how to put it—it follows right after this thought of the tree lifting itself up towards the heavens, its finest life, yonder where the breezes of God play upon it constantly,—but it seems to me we may think of something like this: the unhurried growth of the tree. I know of no experience more enlightening, more hum-

bling, than when wandering through a forest, suddenly to come across a great tree that has been lately cut down, and then to set yourself to the task of counting the rings, and finding how long the tree has grown. Count slowly and calmly, those tiny, little marks of life—a hundred years!—and our forefathers were just completing the war of 1812, making sure of their independence, on land and sea; two hundred years!—and our forefathers were the Colonists, a little company on the eastern slopes of the Alleghanies; three hundred years!—and the Pilgrim Fathers in England were wondering how they could cross the ocean to the New World; four hundred years!—and Columbus is still telling about the New World he has found; a thousand years!—back, in the Middle Ages, the great tree is growing in the fastnesses of California; two thousand years!—when the angels sang in Bethlehem there was a Christmas tree growing on the mountain side of California; three thousand years!—when David wrote of the man like a tree, there was this tree, no longer a sapling, growing here; and when Moses led the people of God out of Egypt, there was a tree starting its growth toward the heavens—here where now it speaks to us of time to grow!

But, as you count those rings, what do you discover? You discover how infinitesimal is the growth; you can hardly measure it without a

magnifying glass, and yet it is a perfect growth all around the circumference of the tree. The tree lived a perfect life; that is why it grew; it lived an all-around life; no part of its life neglected; not one side over-developed or under-developed, but an all-round symmetrical life gave to us through the long centuries the great tree, in which we rejoice. And a man must grow like that, if he will grow rightly and well and grow for the ages. It may be so slowly that you hardly mark progress year after year. Why care about cataclysm or catastrophe? We grow by the almost infinitesimal accretions of each day and week and year, but we must grow all around the circumference of our lives, that we may be perfect, as the circle is perfect, as the tree is perfect that fills out the whole cycle of its life.

Unhurried growth! How the tree rebukes us. Have you never leaned back at night to note the stars looking down through the branches, the leaves, and you have seen in the moonlight the majesty of the tree? Or it may be at midday, when you were busy about your camp, when you were busy about a hundred things, trying to do them all at once, and your plans crowded through the day; and the great tree beside you seemed to smile down upon you, and say, "Why, why so hurried; why so fretful? God takes time to build a tree, and you, O, man, cannot build a life, except as you take time. Hear me, O, man," cries

the tree; "you cannot see the whole of life until you add to time *eternity*. Why so hurried? Why so fretful? Why so anxious, that every day shall see some great achievement? See to it rather that every day shall see that life is maintained in its full tide—so you shall grow! Even as I have grown!"

Oh, the dignity, the dignity of soul of a great tree! Blessed is the man who is like a tree!

And now let me suggest a second lesson:—the great tree seems to have a certain indescribable need of companionship. I know that there are lonely trees, as there are lonely souls in the world; but a lonely tree is apt to be not a symmetrical tree; to have a lonesome look, an unhappy look. The tree that has grown splendid and symmetrical, is one that has grown in a group of its fellows; they need companionship; they shelter each other; they sympathize with each other; they help each other; their roots are intertwined with each other, and their lives and branches are interlaced with each other; they live together for the good of each other. So do men. There are lonely souls, but they are unsymmetrical souls; there are lonesome souls, but they are for the most part unhappy souls. God has set men in families, that their roots, their character, may be intertwined with other characters. God has set men in households, all the forthputting of life interlaced with each other; God has set us in groups,

in communities, in cities and nations, that we may live together for our mutual good; helping each other; sympathizing with each other; loving each other; being strong together, being tall and symmetrical toward heaven together, because we live together. It is the first great lesson of life; it is the last great lesson the world will learn, that we must live together, because we need each other. "Blessed is the man who is like a tree;" that has learned how to live with his fellows, sometimes swaying together, and clashing together with the storm's beat, yet living together in peace, in helpfulness!

And then I will name to you another thing that may seem to you a bit fanciful. It seems to me that the man is like a tree, and the tree is like a man, because each has found a kind of fellowship with the stars, a sort of companionship with the heavens. I wonder if this has come to you: You have been alone in the twilight, the night has come on, as you have been looking up through the long and ever-lengthening vista of the trunks; it has somehow seemed to you as if suddenly the great blue dome overhead rested down upon the tops of the trees, and the stars came out and played hide-and-seek in their branches, and the leaves whispered back to them,—they talked to each other, the stars and the leaves.

Now, that is not merely fanciful; it is only na-

ture's way of saying to you that heaven and earth are not very far apart after all, and that the only way we can come to understand heaven, that which is above us and beyond us, is through the medium of that which is near by, which we can understand.

You remember Browning in one of his poems—he is writing about the farmer, the man who lived day after day by tilling the soil, hard-working, unlearned man, dealing with the things beneath his feet, yet this farmer says

“There's heaven above, and night by night
I look right through its gorgeous roof;
No suns and moons though e'er so bright
Avail to stop me; splendid proof
I keep the broods of stars aloof;
For I intend to get to God.”

The man spent his days with the sod, but knew the way from the sod to God. Toiling all the day—when the night came and the soul could climb up the majestic pathway of the stars, he cries, “I will find God.” So can every man! But we find our way to God along the paths that are very lonesome at first, that are very humble, that lead right out from the place where we are now, and the things that we know,—up and out, on and on forever, into the things that we shall know by and by. The star and the tree are not far apart, and heaven and earth are near neighbors.

But again! A man is like a tree; the tree is like a man, in that each of them is immortal.

How easy it is to kill a tree, yet how hard it is to kill a tree! You may see in some of our great groves a "chimney tree," and you learn that as the tree grew great, the inner growths of the tree became dry; by and by came along some careless hunter, who dropped a spark, kindled a fire under the tree and it found its way into the interior, smouldered slowly, slowly, maybe for months, until at last when a limb was broken off the flame bursts out and the trunk became a great, roaring furnace, a veritable chimney, but the tree still grows strong and vigorous. Why? Because the tree does not live on the inside, but on the outside.

The real, vital thing about a tree is not the life of a hundred years ago, but the life of last year and the year before that. You can burn out that which grew centuries ago, but if you will kill the tree, you must take your axe and cut all around and girdle it—until you have cut through all the fresh growth of the last year; then your tree is doomed.

Do you not see the meaning of the parable? The vital question of a man's life—I am speaking, of course, of his spiritual life—the real life is, not how much or how deeply a man has lived in some far-back time. The question is, how live and vital was he yesterday and is he today!

When I was in college there was an old colored man, janitor of one of the school buildings, and good old Silas would give his testimony once a year, telling us, with great unction, how long ago, when he was a young fellow in his 'teens, he got caught one night and in the woods, by a great thunder storm. So terrified, and not knowing what to do, he climbed up into a big tree, and then God so scared him that he vowed he would be a good man all the rest of his life! And he was a good man—let me bear my testimony to that. But apparently the only guarantee, the only certainty of it was that he remembered that awful experience in the midnight darkness in a big tree.

I recall Mr. Moody's story to us college boys about the man with a tree experience, who came to him and said, "Mr. Moody, I know I am a Christian man; I was soundly converted years ago." Mr. Moody said, "How do you know you were soundly converted?" He said, "I will take you back over the mountains to such a place, and we will go about three miles on the south road and then turn off into a lane, and go a mile and a half down the lane, and then turn off at a certain barn, and go about a hundred yards, until we come to a chestnut tree; on the northeast side of that tree there is an oak stake. Right there, thirty years ago, I was converted, and drove that stake into the ground to mark the spot." "Sup-

pose," Mr. Moody said, "you should go out there some time and find that stake had rotted out, how would you know you were converted?"

It is not what happened to us long years ago. Life is not a question of twenty-five or ten years ago. Life is a question of today. What kind of a man are you now, alive or dead? Alive to God, in Jesus Christ, with the great energies of life throbbing up through your being—that is to live, and anything else is to die. It is easy to kill a man's soul; yet it is impossible if his life is hid with Christ in God, the Ever-Living One.

I said the tree is immortal. Two kinds of immortality there are. You have gone out into one of the great California groves, have you not, and coming perhaps as a stranger and unacquainted with it, you have stumbled into a kind of mystic circle, a magic circle; here is a great ring of trees, giant growths themselves, but they stand in perfect circumference, about an even space, almost like holy ground; so wonderful is it, this ring of trees of life about you. Instinctively you say the Druids would have held this a sanctuary and rejoiced to hold their worship here. Well, be a Druid! Get a scientific basis for your worship, as you discover that once, in ages gone by, a great tree grew there, and when the great tree had lived its life, it disappeared, and up from the circle of its roots, out yonder, and yonder, and yonder, all around, came up the fresh young

shoots, a new generation out of the life of the old tree. Stand, as I have, in the midst of such a circle, twenty feet, thirty feet, forty feet, in diameter, try to think back to the tree that stood there generations before, and you will say reverently, "What a tree it was that once stood here! How splendid it is here to stand in the very presence of immortality, for the tree still lives, in those that have grown from its roots."

You have seen lives like that, and I have seen men like that, out of the circle of whose influence there grew up other lives, splendid lives as the life before them was splendid. The circle of the family, the circle of the business acquaintances, the whole round circle of the man's influence, springing up with a new life,—that is immortality! You have known such a life in this church, and I have come to know something of it. Here and there, again and again, I have met men who have said, with a thrill in their voices, "I was one of Dr. McLean's boys;" women have said, "I was in Dr. McLean's Sunday school;" others have said, "I was here in Dr. McLean's pastorate;" so I hear one and another,—scores, hundreds,—bear testimony to a life that was once lived here, I have stepped into this ever-enlarging circle of wonderful life. I bow my head in reverence, and say, "What a man he was, John Knox McLean!" From him we may learn how to live, so that other lives shall take up the wonderful thread of life,

the marvelous stream of life, the thrilling glory of life, and in like splendor of manhood, tall and erect toward God, carry on a life that is immortal.

The scientific name of one of those great California tree families is *Semper virens*—ever-living—and a man may be like a tree; he shall live forever in the lives of those who come within his influence.

Yet once more. By and by the great tree comes to an end, as man does. It may be that man will use the keen axe, the roaring machinery—the tree is cut down, and cut up. Then, in sorrow for it, you say, “What a pity that it should not have stood for another thousand years!” But the tree is gone. Where is the tree?

Nothing in God’s universe ever disappears. Where is the tree? Yonder is a part of it; it is a brace in a great ship, that carries safely a thousand people over the ocean; yonder is a bit of it, a beam in a great building, that may shelter the lives of scores of persons; here is a part, it is but a bit of a board, but it helps to build a home; yonder is some of the tree, only the tiniest bit, as compared with the magnificence of its great life, only a shingle, but it makes a roof to shelter a man and a woman and a baby. All the joy of a family is beneath the life of the tree, that somehow has been transmuted into manhood, into service, into life, into the generations of the

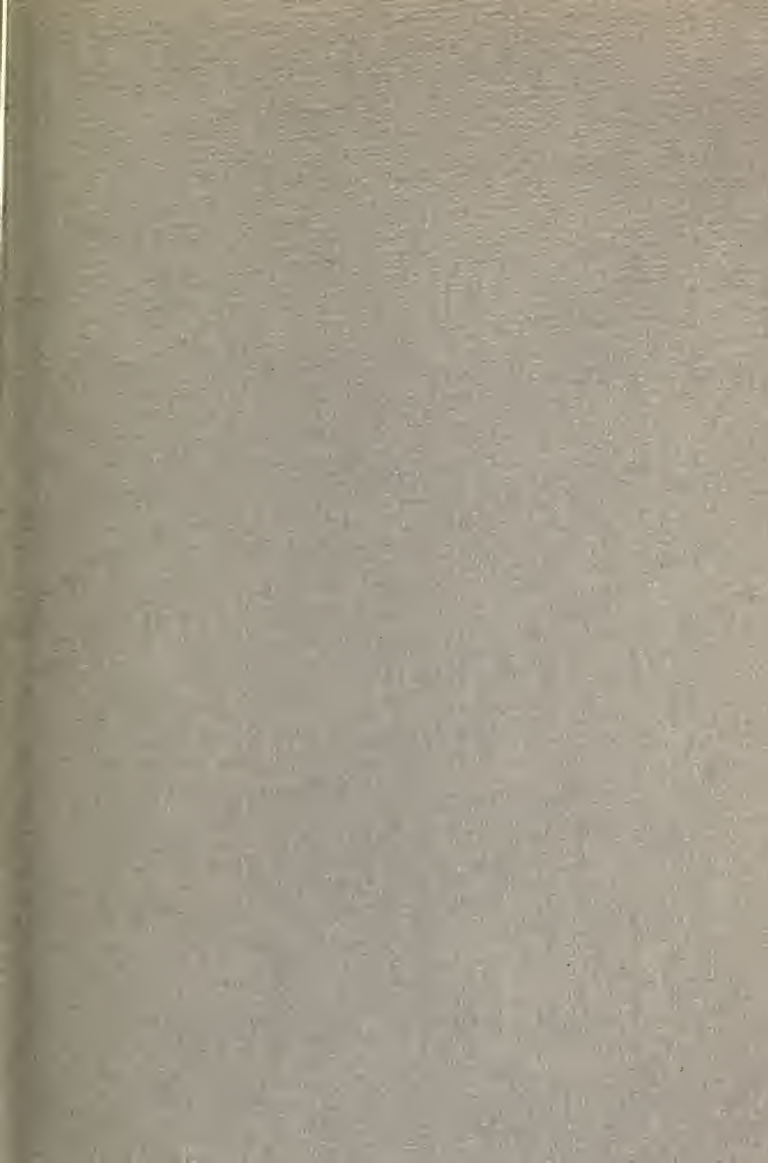
world,—and the tree is still living on, blessing the world.

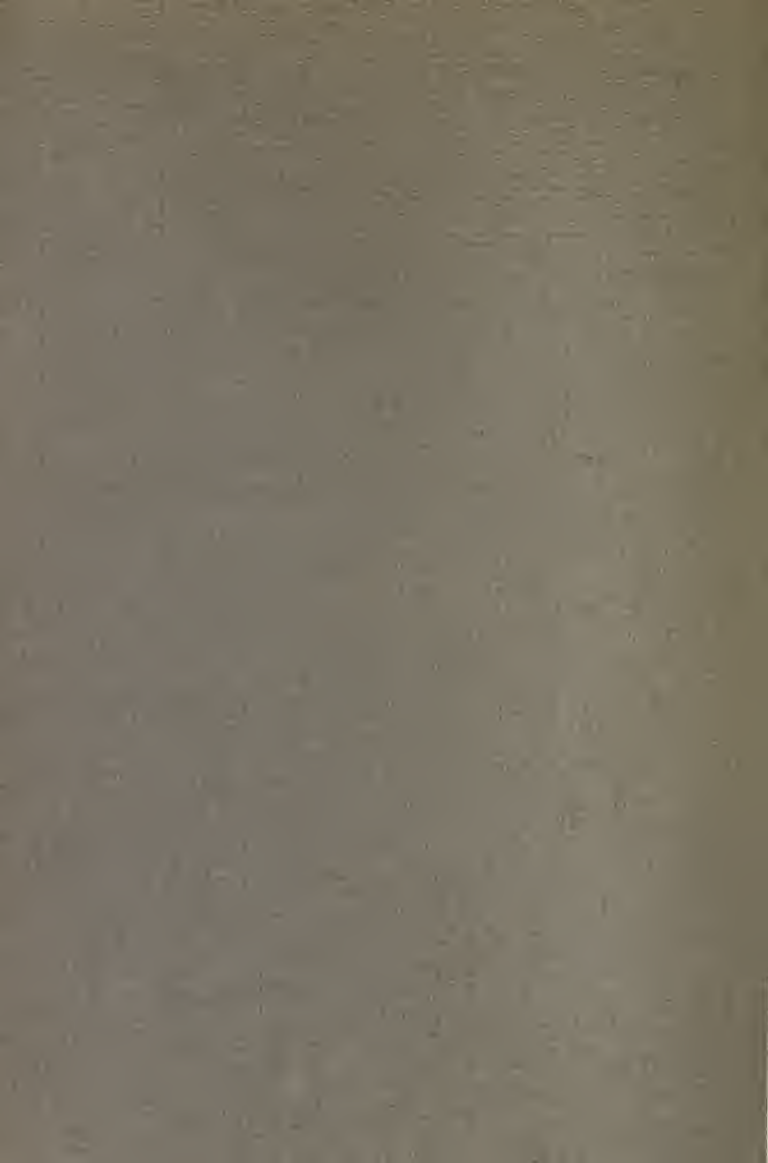
Here is God's plan. The tree lived a thousand years, reared its vital magnificence heavenward in order that there might be a great ship, an humble home, a roof over a family, that life, life, life might go on! So of these life circles of ours. "What a life," we say, and "what a catastrophe!" he was here today doing great things for the world, and on the morrow gone. Ah! but where, where is he? Nothing ever disappears in God's universe. Shall we not believe that, somehow, in the mystic alchemy of God's providence, the lives that are splendid here, are somewhere transmuted into a life more splendid, more far-reaching, more blessed; that the life that here was only a human life, a finite life, has become linked with the life that is divine, that is infinite!

Let me change but one word in a familiar verse, that shall say it better still.

"The tree may live for a thousand years,
For a thousand years and a day,—
But God and I will live and love
When the trees are passed away."

Blessed fate! Glorious privilege—to be like a tree! Aye, like a Big Tree, *Gigantea*,—*Semper-virens!*"







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